

Introduction

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The proliferation of misinformation has become a global concern in recent years. Misleading rhetoric, gross exaggeration, dubious claims, fake photos and videos, groundless rumours, conspiracy theories and other types of falsehood and deliberately manipulative messages now form a part of the media content we consume every day.

In 2020 the severity of the issues surrounding misinformation took centre stage. While governments and medical workers around the world struggled to contain the spread of Covid-19, media professionals and news audiences were engulfed by inaccurate information

about the disease that muddled facts with unsubstantiated claims. This ‘infodemic,’ as the World Health Organization has dubbed it, has led to confusion, panic and even deaths.

With growing awareness of the need to combat misinformation, Asia saw a dramatic expansion in the number of fact-finding initiatives in 2020.

From Pakistan to Papua New Guinea, and from Mongolia to Indonesia, fact-checking projects have been introduced across the region by mainstream news organisations, web-based media outlets, non-profit organisations, governments, charitable foundations and academic institutions.

The latest database compiled by the Reporters’ Lab at Duke University, which has monitored the global development of fact-checking initiatives since 2016, shows more than 300 active fact-checking outlets worldwide as of October 2020, out of which 82 are in Asia.¹ In 2019 in the same database, the number of fact-checkers in the region was 35.²

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Fact-checking
initiatives worldwide

Expanding on Duke University’s research, a short online survey was sent to about 50 organisations in October 2020, followed by interviews with a select number of respondents. The results, based on 40 initiatives in 18 countries and territories, are used to assess Asia’s fact-checking landscape in this chapter.³

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Based in Asia,
up from 35 in 2018

The survey suggests there are more than 100 organisations in Asia engaging in fact-checking operations on a regular basis. This factors in the most recent initiatives and fact-checking projects by traditional media outlets surrounding specific events (such as elections), as well as government-led initiatives, which are discounted by Duke University for their potential lack of independence.

Although each country has a unique misinformation ecosystem influenced by language, culture, the digital environment and legal frameworks, the survey and interviews highlighted some key trends that were common across many countries.

New initiatives in fact-checking have proliferated across the region in recent years.

Somewhat surprisingly, only a few fact-checkers raised concerns over their own safety despite political pressure, online harassment and legal threats being well-documented difficulties faced by journalists and fact-checkers in Asia. In contrast, many noted that societal polarisation over race, religion, ethnicity, politics, the economy and education are key factors that make their work challenging.

Other pressing issues that came up tended to be more practical: scarce data (including public records), difficulty finding expert sources within a country, the time-consuming nature of fact-checking, limits to audience size, lack of funding, a shortage of useful tools in their own languages and inadequate knowledge in specific fields such as medical science among both fact-checkers and the audience.

In the following sections, this chapter focuses on three areas that have significant implications for the future of fact-checking in Asia: government-led initiatives; the role of tech platforms; and emerging opportunities in audience education, automation, crowdsourcing and university collaborations.

Government-led initiatives

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Across Asia, government involvement in fact-checking tends to take two forms. In the first, governments establish their own fact-checking agencies, as seen in India, Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and Vietnam. In the second, authorities opt to work alongside platforms, media organisations and fact-checking outlets, as seen in China, Indonesia and Taiwan.

Government involvement instinctively poses a question of conflict of interest because governments may attempt to appropriate the process for their own ends. Reporters Without Borders’ annual press freedom index and other research⁴ shows political influence is not

uncommon in many Asian newsrooms. Statements and speeches may not be subjected to real scrutiny and, where judicial independence is weak, the authorities have the legal power to determine what is fact and what is false.

Yet journalists working in the region have some experience in dealing with involvement by the authorities. The survey reveals that many fact-checkers have more nuanced views about government involvement. More than a dozen respondents expressed approval for government involvement in public health matters and disaster relief operations. Pervasive Covid-19 misinformation also seems to have attenuated concerns over state-driven fact-checking.



Singapore

Singapore's fact-checking project Factually is arguably the most established and perhaps the longest-running government initiative in Asia.⁵ Founded in 2012 by the Ministry of Communications and Information, its dedicated webpage has been publishing articles to clarify what it deems 'widespread or common misperceptions' since, particularly about government policies and other matters concerning the public interest.⁶

Coupled with a controversial new law called the *Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act*, introduced in late 2019, the government's heavy-handed measures have faced many critics.⁷ But with the spread of potentially life-threatening falsehoods about Covid-19, many Singaporeans also support these state-led initiatives.

Thailand

In November 2019, the Thai government launched the Anti-Fake News Center to monitor and flag a wide range of online content, raising concerns over censorship. A representative from the centre – the only survey respondent from a government-run organisation – said more than 400 people are involved in their fact-checking across the country. Given its track record for stifling criticism of the state and monarchy, government involvement in Thailand is contentious.

In September 2020, the country took legal action against Facebook and Twitter for ignoring the government's requests to take down certain content. It is not clear how much 'fake news' flagged by the project was involved in the litigation.⁸ Meanwhile, Twitter announced a month later that it had identified more than 900 accounts linked to the Thai Royal Army that were engaging in 'information operations' targeting 'prominent political opposition figures'.⁹

India

In India, the Press Information Bureau (PIB) within the Information and Broadcasting Ministry began an operation called PIB Fact Check in December 2019. While its reach and impact remain to be seen, India has the most vibrant community of independent fact-checking organisations in Asia, with more than a dozen outlets certified by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN). Many of them had been operating for years before this new governmental player came into the picture.

Malaysia

A government portal called *sebenarnya.my*, launched in 2017, has reportedly been the only well-known, dedicated fact-checking effort in Malaysia until recently. The website, which is run by the Ministry of Communication and Multimedia, has proven to be popular¹⁰: one media researcher found online traffic to *sebenarnya.my*'s Facebook page surged more than sixfold in 2020 amid the Covid-19 pandemic.¹¹

In addition, the 53-year-old government-owned news agency Bernama founded a fact-checking unit called MyCheck in March 2020. It now has one editor and four fact-checking reporters. According to their survey response, the unit enjoys editorial independence from the rest of the news operation.

Vietnam

Vietnam's Anti-Fake News Center launched in January 2021, dealing in the first instance with Covid-19 misinformation. Much like the Thai centre with the same English name, this initiative is a large-scale state operation.

In Vietnam, all media organisations belong to the state. Although one major news daily, *Tuoi Tre*, has been publishing fact-checking stories regularly for the last four years, the media environment does not allow politically sensitive matters to be investigated by journalists. While there have been some grassroots efforts – for example 1856AA, a Facebook page in Vietnamese that launched in October 2020 to verify social media content – the new government initiative is likely to dominate the field given restrictions on press freedom.

Indonesia, Taiwan and China

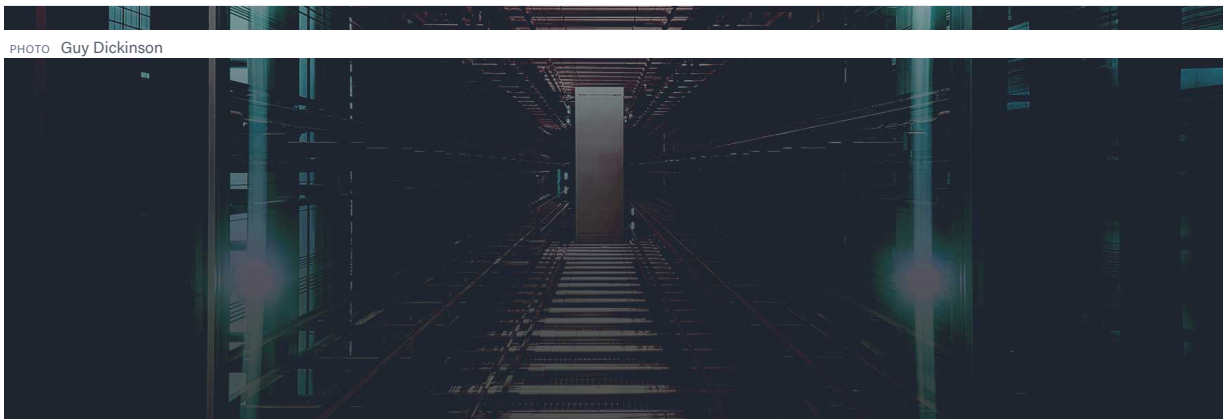
Not all journalists consider cooperating with the authorities counterproductive to the journalistic mission of fact-checking initiatives. Respondents to the fact-checking survey indicated that, depending on the circumstances, working with the government may be necessary and helpful in some situations.

For example, Indonesia's government-run StopHoax website launched in 2018 in collaboration with non-governmental organisations, including independent fact-checking organisations. Two survey respondents involved in the project expressed the view that there is room for cooperation between the public and private sectors when the subject matter is less political and more social, for example human trafficking.

Meanwhile, in Taiwan the most popular chat app LINE works closely with four private fact-checking organisations, as well as the Taiwanese government, sharing resources such as databases about past misinformation and debunked stories.¹² Although the arrangement appears to be designed to respect the independence of each media outlet,¹³ the government frequently highlights its 'successful' cooperation with fact-checkers and social media platforms when dealing with manipulative content about official government outputs, for example speeches by President Tsai Ing-wen.

Perhaps more surprising, the Chinese government launched an online platform in 2018 called Piyao (Refuting Rumour) that aggregates and publishes what it considers fact-checking articles from a variety of media outlets in the country, including state-controlled news wires, Communist Party-controlled local news media and governmental agencies nationwide.¹⁴ Politically sensitive fact-checking cannot be seen on the website and is unlikely to be tolerated by the government elsewhere either.

Despite this, in early 2020 a journalist in Shanghai launched the non-governmental China Fact Check in order to verify widespread rumours and distorted international news circulating on Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo. The initiative has been prolific in debunking questionable content in Chinese about the news outside of China, the majority of which tends to be translations of English-language misinformation.¹⁵



Dilemmas of dealing with tech platforms

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Asia's fact-checking landscape is not only shaped by individual government efforts. Tech platforms, which tend to be the primary vehicles of misinformation, have significant influence on the region's fact-checking industry too.

Facebook works with at least 20 organisations through its Third-Party Fact-Checking (3PFC) program in 13 countries in the region, injecting significant funding into the industry.¹⁶

USD	0
Paid to the United Kingdom's Full Fact by Facebook for 96 investigations	
USD	0
Paid to France's <i>Libération</i> newspaper by Facebook for 290 investigations	

While no 3PFC partner in Asia has openly disclosed how much they are getting paid to provide fact-checking services to Facebook, their counterparts in Europe have provided insights on this. In 2019, the United Kingdom's Full Fact reported having received USD 171,800 from Facebook for 96 fact-checking investigations over a six-month period. In 2018 France's *Libération* newspaper was paid USD 245,000 for 290 investigations.¹⁷ While agreements will likely differ across markets and organisations, these two examples suggest Facebook's remuneration to fact-checkers could be substantial.

This is important given the annual budgets of fact-checking outlets generally tend to be small. The latest survey by the International Fact-Checking Network (IFCN) at Poynter indicates that of 80 organisations globally, more than 60% operate on an annual budget of less than USD 100,000, and half of those operate on a budget of less than USD 50,000.¹⁸ Meanwhile 40% of organisations have four or fewer full-time staff.

In Asia, among the 40 outlets researched for this chapter, two-thirds have fewer than 10 staff when considering both full-time and part-time employees. Numerous editors from different 3PFC organisations said the money they make through their program with Facebook makes up a significant share of their revenue.

A project leader from a non-profit outlet that recently signed the 3PFC agreement with Facebook expressed concern that the organisation would become too dependent on a single source of income from the tech platform.

This dilemma was shared by another fact-checker, who outlined the tension between dramatically reducing the reach of disinformation using Facebook's algorithms on the one hand – thus fulfilling their journalistic mission – and, on the other hand, allowing the scope of their work to be determined by a private tech company – a realistic possibility given the substantial revenue resulting from the partnership.

Lack of financial resources was a recurring theme expressed by many fact-checkers in the survey. Those who are not in the 3PFC program are exploring opportunities to work with Facebook despite the potential quandary they may face in the future.

To become a 3PFC partner, Facebook stipulates that fact-checkers need to be a verified signatory of IFCN's Code of Principles. Organisations must go through a rigorous assessment process on non-partisanship, funding transparency and methods of fact-checking.¹⁹

Worldwide, verified signatories include fact-checking divisions of well-known news outlets like Associated Press, Reuters and *The Washington Post*, as well as smaller online media and civil society organisations. The largest fact-checking organisation in Asia is an international news wire, Agence France-Presse (AFP). Called the 'digital investigation unit', its dedicated fact-checking team has more than 90 journalists covering 80 countries globally.²⁰ In the region, it serves as a 3PFC partner in 11 countries and regions,²¹ working in at least six languages.²²

In Asia, 26 organisations had IFCN signatory status as of November 2020 (of which 20 outlets work with Facebook). But many other outlets and initiatives in the region also declare on their websites that they adhere to the international guidelines set by IFCN.

In the survey, five editors from newly formed fact-checking projects candidly said they plan to apply to join 3PFC because they see Facebook’s program as a way to bring in sustainable funding. Some even said becoming a 3PFC partner was built into their business strategy from the outset.

Besides Facebook, the video-sharing app TikTok announced it had launched its own 3PFC program in the Asia Pacific in October 2020, initially partnering with AFP in Australia, Indonesia, New Zealand, Pakistan and the Philippines, and with US-based Lead Stories in South Korea and Thailand. ²³ Despite requests for information, no party has clarified whether they are financially compensated by TikTok’s 3PFC program.

Google is another large-scale funder in the region. However, its involvement appears to have a less direct financial impact on daily fact-checking operations in the newsroom. Funding from the Google News Initiative supports training, conferences and other journalism-related projects that can relate to fact-checking. While many fact-checking organisations in Asia have received grants from Google to date, the funding tends to be tied to specific events and projects, rather than paying for fact-checking services.

Some outlets also work as ‘trusted flaggers’ for YouTube, reviewing and flagging questionable video clips on the platform. However, this arrangement does not involve financial compensation.



Emerging opportunities for fact-checking

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When it comes to the future of fact-checking, several areas of opportunity were identified among the experts surveyed: audience education, automation, crowdfunding and university collaborations.

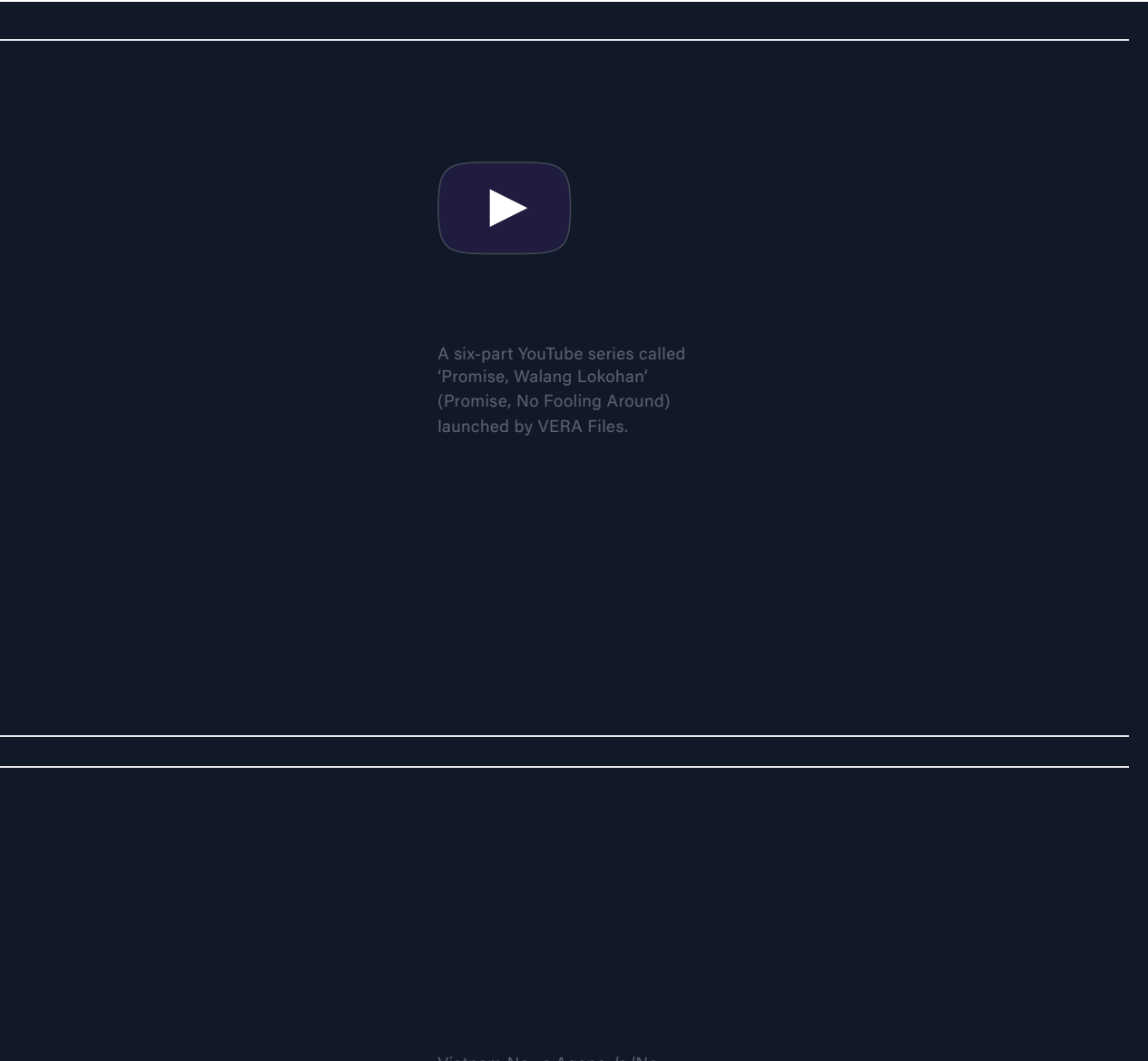
Audience education

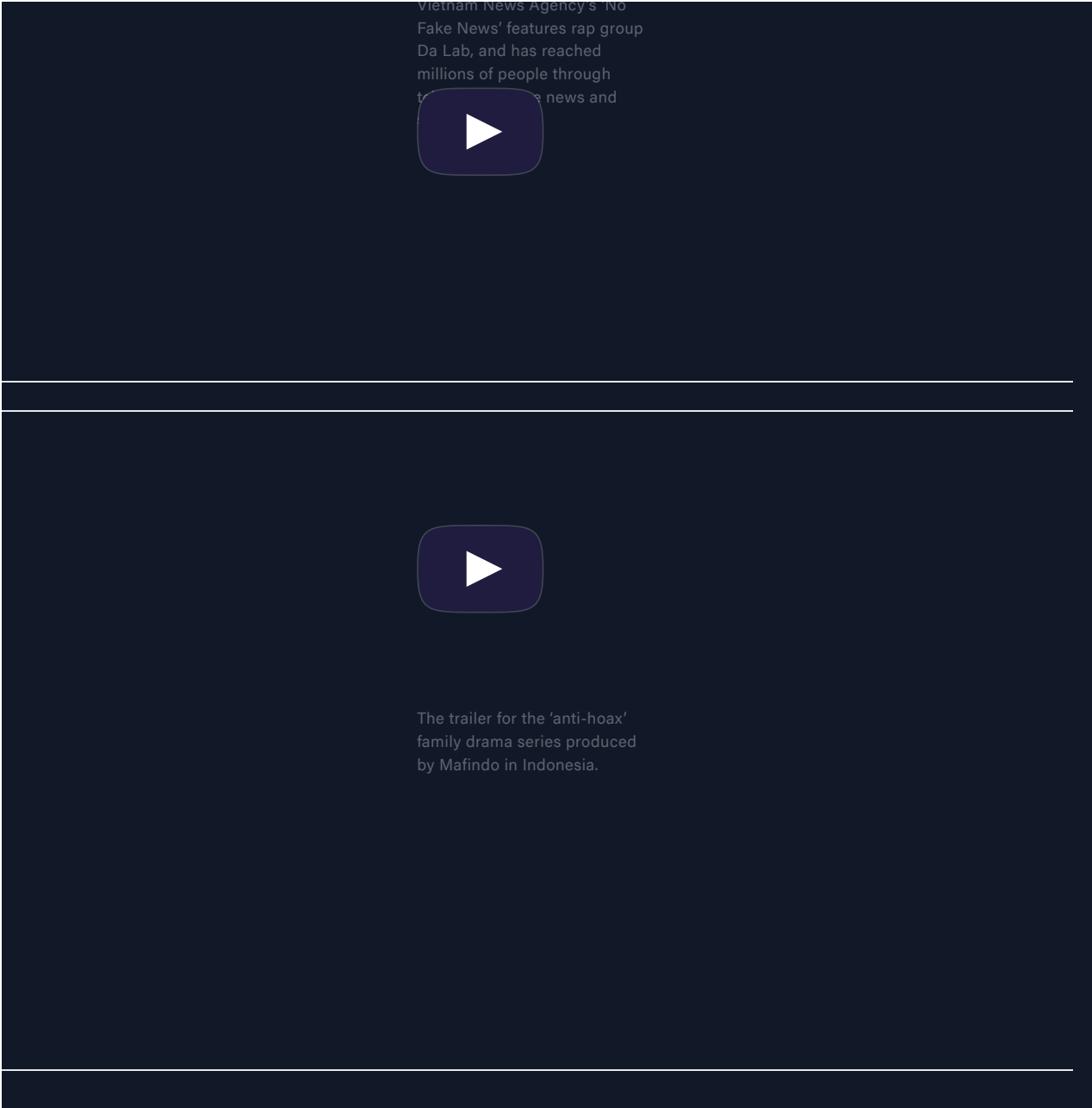
Across the region, there has been a proliferation of training programs for media professionals and journalists in fact-checking techniques. The most extensive training program in the region by some way is an ongoing project in India, led by DataLEADS, Internews and Google News Initiative. With support from established fact-checking outlets such as Boom and Alt News, the India Training Network has worked with more than 20,000 participants across India since its inception in 2018, including those from other fact-checking organisations. ²⁴

Smaller-scale training for local journalists and in-house reporters is taking place in many countries, including Japan, Indonesia, Myanmar, the Philippines and Taiwan.

But, in a growing trend, organisations are increasingly directing education initiatives at their audiences and the general public, rather than at media professionals. Survey respondents indicated their organisations are putting more emphasis on running misinformation awareness campaigns and incorporating fact-checking into media literacy programs.

Thailand’s Sure and Share Center, a long-time fact-checking initiative run by the state-owned national broadcaster MCOT, for example, collaborates with local universities to train students through a newsroom simulation in the classroom called ‘Fake News Fighter’. In 2020 MCOT also launched a TV show called ‘Fact Check Expert’ aimed at the general public to teach fact-checking tools and techniques.





Video-based tutorials targeting the audience are also becoming more common across the region. The Philippines' VERA Files launched a six-part YouTube series called 'Promise, Walang Lokohan' (Promise, No Fooling Around) ²⁵ in October 2020, alongside its in-person training for students and local reporters, and a fact-checking manual published in 2018. ²⁶ Taiwan's FactCheck Center also created a series of video lessons and fact-checking challenges on topics like geolocation and vehicle license plate identification. ²⁷

IMAGE factcheckvn / TikTok

@factcheckvn has a large following on TikTok, describing itself as 'Vietnam News Agency's Gateway to Generation Z'.

Myanmar ICT for Development Organization (MIDO), which runs the IFCN-certified initiative Real or Not, teamed up with the country's independent broadcaster Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) to produce a media literacy show called 'MILKy!', while DVB also runs a separate fact-checking TV show with a variety of content.

Many projects go beyond social media verification. Some focus on raising awareness about the potential risks and societal impact of misinformation, while others try unconventional ways to reach a wider audience. The 'anti-hoax' family drama series ²⁸ by Indonesia's Mafindo and Vietnam News Agency's 'No Fake News' rap music video targeting youths, along with its 'Factcheckvn' TikTok project, ²⁹ have gained large audiences through TV, video streaming services, YouTube and other platforms. 'Factcheckvn' won 'Best Project for News Literacy' in the Asian Digital Media Awards presented by the World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) in 2020.

Automation via social listening and chatbots

Newsrooms are also exploring the use of automation tools to flag content and engage with audiences in new ways.

Fact-checking remains a highly manual task, where sifting through posts, images, videos, speeches and statements is a time-consuming first step to identifying potentially harmful misinformation. Newsrooms in Japan and Taiwan are putting their efforts into automating this process with dedicated fact-checking tools.

In Taiwan, a tool using machine learning and artificial intelligence called 'Rumor Catcher' was built to help fact-checking initiatives that identify, collect, and cluster potentially harmful content in Chinese.

Not-for-profit FactCheck Initiative Japan (FIJ) supports partners like national newspaper *Mainichi* and BuzzFeed Japan with three automatic fact-checking tools that its members can use. The Fact-Checking Console automates the monitoring and aggregation of potentially problematic content on the internet using machine learning and natural language processing. The ClaimMonitor then filters, tags and flags the content to notify media partners on Slack. When fact-checking stories are published by member organisations, the articles can be distributed through an app called FactCheck Navi that summarises the findings for the audience with links to the original content. ³⁰

In Taiwan, a tool using machine learning and artificial intelligence called Rumor Catcher was built to help fact-checking initiatives that identify, collect and cluster potentially harmful content in Chinese. ³¹ The tool is still at an experimental stage, and its effectiveness in picking up misleading or false information worthy of investigation remains to be seen, according to a senior editor involved in the project.

Building a system specific to a country's language and social media environment, as seen with the efforts in Japan and Taiwan, is an attempt to supplement existing tools like CrowdTangle. It is a recurring talking point among fact-checkers in other countries in Asia, but most say they lack the resources and capacity to start such projects.

Chatbots for messaging apps, on the other hand, have been implemented by many organisations across the region, including in India, Indonesia, Myanmar, Taiwan and Thailand on messaging services such as LINE, WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger.

Typically, chatbots are linked to databases that store the details of past fact-checking investigations. Inquiries sent by users to the bot account are compared to claims in the database. When there is a match, the user will get an immediate response and links to the relevant stories. Different organisations take different approaches when there is no match, but often the user's messages are sent to human fact-checkers for further investigation.

For this chatbot model to work, the database needs to have a sizable collection of datasets. For this reason, cross-organisational collaborations to share content and contribute to a single database are taking place in some countries.

Most notably, in 2020 many fact-checking outlets in Asia participated in the #CoronaVirusFacts Alliance initiated by IFCN, contributing to a large database of more than 9,000 stories about Covid-19 misinformation. The database has become the backbone of IFCN's chatbot on WhatsApp, which is available in multiple languages around the world.

Crowdsourcing

Another emerging trend in fact-checking has been crowdsourcing, with three initiatives using this approach as of January 2021.

Cofact in Thailand is the newest crowd-based initiative. It was founded in 2020. It is modelled after Taiwan's Cofacts, an open-source, collaborative verification platform that connects users and volunteer citizen editors through LINE, a popular chat app both in Thailand and Taiwan.

While the impact of Cofact remains to be seen, its predecessor in Taiwan has been at the forefront of combating misinformation with user-oriented fact-checking since 2018.

Indonesia's Mafindo was the first to adopt a hybrid citizen-professional fact-checking model in 2015. In 2021 the project has 506 volunteers, 100 students from 20 universities, 12 full-time staff and 15 part-time members, according to a representative who responded to the survey.

Academic collaboration

Experimentation is taking place in journalism schools across the region as well. Universities are going beyond teaching fact-checking techniques in the classroom to mobilise students for real newsroom work with published outputs.

FactRakers at the University of the Philippines-Diliman, Hong Kong Baptist University's HKBU FactCheck Service and the University of Hong Kong's bilingual Annie lab newsroom, as well as Japan's Wasegg at Waseda University, are just some of examples of academic institutions joining the growing community of fact-checkers in the region. Likewise, Australia's Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology has joined forces with the country's public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, to create RMIT ABC Fact Check.



New regional initiatives



New initiatives in fact-checking have proliferated across the region in recent years.

Before months of civil unrest began in June 2019 in Hong Kong, there was only one local effort checking social media content in Chinese, Kauyim Media. By the end of 2019, there were four other initiatives in Hong Kong: Chinese-language FactWire, Factcheck Lab and the two university projects with Hong Kong Baptist University and Hong Kong University.

In Japan, the national daily *Mainichi* has created a 25-person fact-checking team, and certain national issues have seen all major dailies publish fact-checking stories, including the nation's largest newspaper, *Yomiuri*, for the first time.³²

In addition to the March 2020 launch of MyCheck in Malaysia, a new independent fact-checking website called Faqcheck Lab began posting stories in January 2021 in English and Malay. The popular news portal Free Malaysia Today also has a dedicated page called 'Fake or Not' that aggregates and checks various claims circulating among the public.

Other new initiatives in the region include Blackdot Research in Singapore, Fact Check Mongolia and Thailand's Cofact.

While new initiatives are flourishing in many countries, prominent fact-checking organisations are also expanding. AFP, for example, has been steadily growing its capacity in Asia by opening new offices in different countries and in more languages, hiring new staff along the way. India's Boom and Fact Crescendo also operate in multiple countries and languages.

In South Korea, almost all major newspapers and broadcasters have fact-checking projects.³³ Seoul National University's SNU FactCheck Center offers a platform through which 30 media outlets can cross-check disputed claims and the audience can compare fact-checking stories.

Ongoing challenges for regional fact-checking efforts



Even in authoritarian countries with limited press freedom such as China and Vietnam, fact-checking is recognised as a helpful tool in countering false claims, especially in relation to public health.

Despite this, rising government involvement in fact-checking needs to be carefully monitored. The Duterte administration in the Philippines, for example, has repeatedly demonstrated its opposition to organisations like *Rappler* and VERA Files (both Facebook 3PFC partners). In September 2020 the government indicated it was considering establishing its own fact-checking team after Facebook took down several accounts supporting the government.³⁴

Such developments are alarming. The term 'fake news' is being misappropriated by governments and politicians in Asia to attack the news media they do not like. As 'fact-checking' enters into the everyday lexicon, it could also be weaponised by resourceful state actors and other politically motivated groups.

Financial deals between fact-checking outlets and tech companies also require close examination. With their reliance on donations, grants and syndication, many not-for-profits and small initiatives find it difficult to diversify their funding. Commercially minded media outlets have more funding options, such as advertising or support from other business units. But overall, fact-checkers in Asia are not as resourceful as their counterparts in Europe or North America.

Under these circumstances, Facebook's 3PFC program in particular is seen as an integral part of creating sustainable newsroom operations for smaller organisations.

But questions remain about how this will affect the scope of fact-checkers' work. For instance, politicians' posts are currently exempted from the 3PFC program, with Facebook saying that placing limits on the speech of elected officials would infringe the people's right to know. But politicians in the region tend to be one of the main drivers of widespread misinformation and disinformation given their political biases and their wide public reach.³⁵ What may work in Western countries does not necessarily benefit Asia's news audiences.

Fact-checking is quickly becoming one of journalism's most vibrant and collegial areas of work. Its ongoing expansion across Asia is likely in the foreseeable future. As new initiatives launch in the region, there will be more players with differing degrees of skills, ethical standards and even motivations. The field will inevitably become more entangled, especially with government-supported projects, and risks becoming more fragmented, and less unified, in the long run. Asian fact-checkers will inevitably be at the forefront of efforts to keep public conversations grounded in established facts.

References



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